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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

THE FINAL YEAR OF THE
FRENCH - VIET MINH WAR AND
ANALOGIES WITH THE PRESENT SITUATION

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Final Year of the French - Viet Minh War
And Analogies With the Present Situation

Parallels Between the French Experience and the Present
US/GVN Campaign against the Viet Cong

1. In certain respects there are obvious parallels between the 1946-1954 French war against the Viet Minh and the present US/GVN struggle against the Viet Cong, which began in 1957 (with sporadic but systematic Communist terrorism) and was well launched into its military phase by 1959. Despite surface similarities, however, there are at least two fundamental differences between the French experience in the final stages of the Indochina war and the present struggle.

2. In purely military terms, the 1953-1954 battles between the French and the Viet Minh were on a much larger scale and involved a different kind of warfare from what has so far occurred in the anti - Viet Cong struggle in South Vietnam. If one were to essay a military comparison, the present struggle in South Vietnam would have to be considered roughly comparable to the military situation that existed in late 1949 or early 1950 when the Viet Minh began to employ larger elements of their regular forces, as the Viet Cong have done in the past six months. At that time, as the capabilities of regular Viet Minh formations increased, they struck with new boldness against isolated but major French outposts. By mid-1950, they had succeeded in taking several major French forts, inflicting defeats on sizable French units in pitched battles, and in driving the French out of large areas of North Vietnam. To some extent, the Viet Minh drive in 1950 was roughly comparable to the current Viet Cong monsoon offensive; there may also be some parallels in the US/GVN response.

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3. There is a second, more fundamental political and psychological difference between the two conflicts: France was firmly determined to retain political control over Indochina and had no intention of leaving unless or until it was driven out. Its intransigence on this issue, as much as any other single factor, cost it the war. The US, in complete contrast, avowedly wants to leave as soon as it can establish a situation in which withdrawal will not fatally jeopardize the stability of a truly independent non-Communist South Vietnam. This is something of which both non- and anti-Communist Vietnamese are very much aware. Because of this, the US has not suffered what was a major French political liability; indeed, the Communists have so far had remarkably little success with their constantly repeated propaganda theme that the Americans are successor imperialists to the French. Because of this fundamental political difference, analogies between the total French experience in Indochina and the present conflict can be quite misleading.

4. In summary, the parallels between the present Vietnam conflict and the final year of France's struggle against the Viet Minh are few and essentially superficial. There are some valid parallels, however, with earlier stages of the French - Viet Minh war which, given current trends, could become more distinct as the conflict progresses.

The Setting in 1953

5. When General Henri Navarre became commander in chief of French armed forces in Indochina on 8 May 1953, France's war with the Viet Minh had already been going on for six and a half years. For at least three of these years the intensity and scale of the ground warfare had been greater in degree than anything yet seen in the Viet Cong campaign against the US/GVN forces.

6. As early as February 1950 General Giap had announced that the guerrilla stage was over and the war of movement had begun (something the Viet Cong have yet to do). On 24 May 1950 the frontier post of Lao Kay was overrun by a five-battalion Viet

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Minh assault (about the size of the largest Viet Cong action yet attempted). In September 1950, Dong Khe fell to a fourteen battalion Communist assault, and in the following month (October 1950) a 6,500-man French Union force was decimated in the Cao Bang debacle by a Communist force of about 18,000 men. By 1951 the Viet Minh had more than three organic and operating divisions. In January 1952 a coordinated three-division Communist assault compelled a French Union force of over 20,000 men to withdraw from the Hoa Binh area.

7. By the time Navarre assumed command, the Viet Minh had seven regular infantry divisions, with independent regiments equivalent in aggregate strength to about two more (i.e., an operating equivalent of about nine divisions). In numbers, the Viet Minh had about 125,000 regulars, 75,000 full-time regional and provincial troops, and about 150,000 part-time guerrillas. The 1953 Viet Minh force, in short, was about equal in numbers and units (if not in firepower and support elements) to the present South Vietnamese Army.

8. To combat these Communist forces the French, in May 1953, had committed about 175,000 regulars (54,000 Frenchmen, plus Foreign Legionnaires, North Africans, Sub-Saharan Africans, and Vietnamese who fought in the French Union forces) and about 55,000 auxiliaries, plus a naval contingent of 5,000 and an air force contingent of 10,000, together with local forces of the "Associated States" (150,000 Vietnamese regulars plus 50,000 Vietnamese auxiliaries, 15,000 Laotians, and 10,000 Cambodians). By 1952, about eight percent of France's national budget was being allocated for expenses connected with the Indochina war. In the one year between October 1952 and October 1953, 1,860 Frenchmen were killed fighting in Indochina, along with 4,049 from the Foreign Legion and other French Union contingents and 7,730 Vietnamese. During the nine-year course of the war (1946-1954), 20,685 metropolitan Frenchmen were killed or missing in action.* (From 1961 through mid-July 1965, about 500 US military personnel have been killed fighting in Vietnam.)

*This figure does not include 11,620 Foreign Legionnaires, 15,229 North Africans and 26,686 Indochinese (Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodians) KIA or MIA in the French Union forces. Nor does it include the anti-Communist, French-supported Vietnamese National Army's casualties, which totaled over 45,000.

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The Inevitability of the Final Outcome

9. When Navarre assumed his command in May 1953, France's fate in Indochina had already been sealed by a combination of (1) France's general political posture vis-a-vis Vietnamese nationalist aspirations, (2) her generally defensive military strategy coupled with her inability to prevent Chinese Communist assistance from nourishing the Viet Minh after 1949, and (3) the deleterious effect of French domestic politics on the conduct of the war. In essence, the year between Navarre and Geneva constituted the final scenes of a tragedy whose outcome was virtually inevitable.

The Basic Political Issue

10. At the risk of some exaggeration and considerable oversimplification, one could say that France lost Indochina at the Brazzaville Conference of January 1944, convened by the French Committee for National Liberation to lay down the principles for future relations between France and its empire after the end of World War II. The essence of future French policy for Indochina was, in effect, laid out in the preamble of the conference's political recommendations, which stated that

"...the aims of the work of civilization which France is accomplishing in her possessions exclude any idea of autonomy and any possibility of development outside the French Empire bloc. The attainment of 'self-government' in the colonies, even in the most distant future, must be excluded."

France never changed this policy; indeed, it continued to influence Paris' relationships with the GVN even after 1954. France's consistent refusal even to consider the possibility of ultimate Vietnamese independence made it impossible for it either to forge an effective Vietnamese political counter to the Viet Minh or to allow the Vietnamese to form a truly nationalist anti-Communist

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political mechanism on their own. More than anything else, this attitude cost France the war.

France's Basic Strategy

11. By May 1953, France had surrendered most of the North Vietnamese highlands to the largely undisputed possession of the Viet Minh, along with parts of the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam, some of the uplands in the center, and most of the coastal portions of present day Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh provinces. The French, in effect, had retreated to the Red River Delta in the north, to certain key towns in the center, and the region around Saigon in the south.

12. Despite certain obvious parallels, the French situation in 1953 was far more adverse than the present US/GVN situation in South Vietnam. The GVN has so far abandoned only five minor district towns and no major cities. It is still capable of conducting sweeps through any area of the country, including major Viet Cong base areas (e.g., Zone D). The French, by contrast, had abandoned all their frontier strongpoints (Cao Bang, Lang Son, etc.), and several large towns (e.g., Hoa Binh) and simply could not go into regions such as the Viet Bac. Even though the French high command hoped until the end to engage the Viet Minh in a large set-piece battle (which they finally did at Dien Bien Phu), in a strategic sense the French had more or less given up hope of military victory by the time General Navarre arrived. The French placed primary tactical emphasis on a series of strongpoints and defensive positions which gave the enemy the advantage of maneuverability and allowed the Communists to pick the times and places of engagements. Navarre, in fact, found upon his arrival that despite the large number of French Union and local forces fighting in Vietnam, only seven mobile groups and eight parachute battalions (the equivalent of three divisions) were available for offensive operations--the remainder of the French force was tied to defensive duties.

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The Effect on the War of French Domestic Politics

13. France was never united or consistent in its prosecution of the war in Indochina. The war was never popular in France itself, was actively opposed by many on the left, and was cynically used by others for domestic political ends dictated by motives that were often questionable and through tactics that were far from laudable. The Viet Minh paid careful attention to, drew considerable comfort and encouragement from, and not infrequently made good use of these French domestic political considerations. (Ho Chi Minh's political and negotiating tactics during the 1945-46 period, in fact, were heavily influenced by his belief that the Communists would soon come to power in France.) For a long time, Paris endeavored to pretend that the war in Indochina was not a war but a "police action." Not until July 1952 was the legal status of "veteran" (with its attendant rights and benefits) given to Frenchmen who had been on active service in Indochina, and the French National Assembly never did steel itself to allow conscripts to be posted to the Indochina theater. The ambivalent legal status of the conflict enabled the Communists in France to carry their opposition to the point of sabotage without incurring the legal charge of treason.

14. Again, there are some parallels between the 1953 domestic situation in France and the present scene in the US, but such parallels are easily overdrawn. Our current student demonstrations and "teach-ins," adverse press commentaries, and congressional restlessness constitute but a pale shadow of the concerted and organized domestic opposition with which successive French governments had to contend. This included resolutions favoring negotiation and early withdrawal frequently proposed and occasionally passed by non-Communist parties, particularly the Socialists. Leak and counterleak was an accepted domestic political tactic, and as a result even highly classified reports or orders pertaining to the war were often published with verbatim accuracy in the pages of various political journals or newspapers. Equipment and supplies destined for Indochina were regularly sabotaged in French factories and ports and returning soldiers, including the hospitalized wounded, were systematically harassed and vilified.

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The Course of Events: 1953-1954

15. The end of the fighting in Korea in the spring of 1953 enabled the Chinese Communists to increase their aid to the Viet Minh in significant measure, with results that soon became apparent on the Indochina battlefield. Navarre started off with a brave new plan (actually drafted by his predecessor, General Salan) which was designed to turn static defense responsibilities over to Vietnamese forces, freeing French and French Union regulars for offensive action. The "Navarre Plan," however, foundered on several rocks, including the inability of the Vietnamese levies to handle their new responsibilities. France scored some tactical successes, suffered some defeats, and was on balance unable to inhibit the steady build-up in Communist military strength. In November 1953, the French made the fateful decision to reoccupy Dien Bien Phu (which had been in Communist hands for over a year) in order to check renewed Viet Minh incursions into Laos.

16. Within Vietnam, negotiations between the French, Bao Dai, and the latter's changing cabinets continued with much activity but little progress toward forming a government capable of rallying Vietnamese nationalist sentiments. This complex story involved intricate dealings on many levels between the Paris government, French commercial and financial interests in Vietnam, and Vietnamese citizens of widely varying loyalties, ambitions, and scruples. At home in France, pressure for negotiation and settlement mounted steadily, with a number of prominent politicians--especially Pierre Mendes-France--pushing such themes with particular vigor. The January 1954 Berlin conference gave considerable impetus to this pressure and by 18 February it was decided that a conference should be held in Geneva in April to consider both Korea and Indochina.

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17. The Viet Minh leaders were not entirely pleased by this talk of negotiation, for they scented the imminent possibility of total victory and did not want to settle at the conference table for less than they thought they could win on the battlefield. (The Communist attitude toward negotiation in fact, constitutes perhaps the most valid parallel between the situation in 1953 and the situation existing today.) Once armistice negotiations were definitely in prospect, however, Giap resolved to throw all his available forces into the struggle in an attempt to extend Viet Minh control over Indochinese territory and, especially, to inflict a spectacular defeat on the French Expeditionary Corps. For the latter, he found Dien Bien Phu made to his order by Navarre. After a fifty-six-day siege, Dien Bien Phu fell on 7 May--the day before the Indochina phase of the Geneva Conference opened.

The Outcome

18. Dien Bien Phu was a stunning tactical reverse for the French, but not necessarily a strategic defeat. (The French lost sixteen battalions, a tank squadron, some artillery, six fighters, some observation planes, and a helicopter.) Had Paris the will to continue the fight, replacements could have been sent from France and the Indochina war continued for months if not years. Paris, however, did not have the will. The fall of Dien Bien Phu --as the Communists had confidently expected--made the French Government anxious to disengage as soon as decently possible. The fall of the Laniel cabinet on 12 June and the advent of Mendes-France as premier on 18 June hastened the conclusion of the settlement, probably resulting in the acceptance of more disadvantageous terms from the Communists than might otherwise have been the case (e.g., partition at the 17th parallel rather than the 18th). Nevertheless, the outcome was by then inevitable, primarily because of French political decisions, not because further military efforts were impossible.

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